

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INFORMANT: STEVE SCHMIDT
CONDUCTED BY: TOM RANKIN**

**S = STEVE
T = TOM**

LFP TR-R039

Interview begins with informant in mid-sentence:

Steve: ...which you can see is in English and in Lao orientation handbook, and it has oh, a vast variety of things like information about the USA, land, climate, people, government, living in the USA, housing, healthcare, food, employment, education, money, banking, credit, business ownership, transportation, shopping community resources. I think that's an excellent work. It's a bit dated. Uh, it was published in December of '79. And uh, I make, I make about three of these a week, and they get all scoffed up immediately.

T: Is that right?

S: And I try to keep them for newly arriving families, but frequently people who have been here for a long time see it. And the contents is so interesting that they just scoff them up and take them. So anyway that's, that's, so we're glad and that's another reason we want the Department of Social, the Department of Public Welfare and Social Worker here so we can make that initial contact with people. (T: Umhm) And tell them about our services and be opened to them.

T: One of the things this whole project is doing is we're of course interested in a lot of different ethnic groups in, (S: right) in Lowell. And we're looking at the city geographically and ethnically. And you know, as always is the case there are a number of stereotypes about different ethnic groups. (S: Umhm) And as stereotypes usually go portions of them are probably somewhere near accurate and other parts are totally fictitious (S: Right) and sometimes malicious. (S: Umhm) You don't really see that, I haven't run into that so much with Southeast Asians as much as Hispanic immigrants to be quite honest, fear. (S: Yeah, yeah) But what I was wondering is one of the stereotypes that's a very positive one of Southeast Asians is their, their work effort and the ability to quickly get on their feet and to begin buying you know, their own place to live, (S: Right) or car, or whatever. Could you talk some about that, or one of the

(--) You know talk a little bit about your experience with that, and whether that is in fact a real pattern.

S: Yes. Um, [loud noise] to a large extent I think I have to say yes with the Laotian specifically. Uh, they are very highly employed and the latest figures I have from my predecessor, they're dated, um, she said that and she based this on a list of names provided by the Department of Public Welfare of people receiving welfare payments, 2% of the Laotian living in the Greater Lowell Area are receiving welfare. 2%, okay. That's like three times lower than the if you will, Native American, not native as an Indian of course, but non-immigrant American. So they're very high employed, very hard working. And my experience has been that I actually, I'm myself in a sense, an immigrant having returned so recently from a long stay overseas. Uh, I sometimes sit here with envy as people come in and tell me about the land and the houses that they're buying. One reason they can do it of course is that um, a family of two people will hold down 2 1/2 jobs. Um, they also live in large extended families. And a lot of their house buying is done together as a group, or as groups. Sometimes even though they're not related friends, or groups of families will get together and buy a house. So in this respect they're become very quickly adapted to an element, or an aspect of American society. They still have to [unclear] legal problems when they buy houses and a lot of people are getting burned. Especially land in Florida. The word is out that Laotian refugees want land in Florida. And I've had several cases, and I think that's only part of the total number, of people who have come in a bought land sight unseen, or bought land without the assistance of a lawyer, which of course any American (T: would never do) would never do. Well most Americans I guess would never do it.

Um, I think what happens is a lot of Laos come here and the first house they buy is probably from a fellow Laos. And then when they go on to bigger and better things, they start dealing indirectly with Americans, people who are less, they can communicate with less because of the language barrier and perhaps somebody who are less, other people who are less trustworthy, they get taken frequently, or they find themselves in a less desirable position. So I can confirm that they are very hard working and very highly employed. And I don't know why that is. In Southeast Asia, in Thailand where I spent my time, the northeast and Laos has a reputation of being a very laid back country. And if you wanted, you know, if you lived in Thailand and you had gotten used to the hustle of Thailand, you wanted to take a vacation, you went to, one place you could go is Laos and people would come back and say, "it's like Thailand used to be fifty years ago." It's so quiet, so few cars. And the people are, you know, they're farmers basically. They're very you know, they're country people and they're just you know, they're really attractive aspect of, of the agriculture society that Americans have gotten used to. [phone rings] Excuse me. [Answers phone] Laotian office, this is Steve, may I help you? Yes it is. Uh huh. Sure. Sure, just come on down, or if you want you can just send it in the mail and we'll put it up. Our address is 79 High Street. Um, you know where that is? Okay, we're in the same building as the International Institute. As soon as you walk in the front door just keep walking straight ahead. Don't go up the stairs, and you can't avoid our office. Okay? You're welcome, by now. That was a work agency. They want to put a sign up in our office, which that entire bulletin board, these two bulletin boards are entirely devoted to job openings. This one is mostly, we get from like State Agencies for like Library Assistants. The demand of Bachelors in Library Science. Obviously very few of our clients will qualify for those. And the other board is more for the typical kinds of jobs that we can get for our clients.

T: What, what are some of those?

S: Basically entry level high tech. Um, assembly, electronical, mechanical, um, custodial, janitorial, uh, things that demand limited language skills, but perhaps good eye to hand coordination, or good control of hand. Good motor control. Uh, another, (--) That's, that's most of where our people are working. And Massachusetts as I'm sure you're aware, in the Lowell area in particular has been, has become a magnet for secondary migration, which is one of our major problems. Um, because of the high tech industry and the fact that they can, they know they can start here at least \$5.50 if not better per hour, and probably if they're working second, or third shift they're going to get a 10 or 15% differential. And they'll probably be getting benefits as well with these, with the better high-tech industries. So it's a very nice package. And then as persons, as people develop experience and skill in that area they can transfer to a better company and they can perhaps negotiate a better starting wage, because they've got experience. (T: Right) And so that's where most of the people are getting hired.

T: What are some of those companies? I mean Wang obviously (--)

S: Wang obviously, Eltron, which is down in Wilmington. Um, [Airex?], there's one right here in Lowell which does mechanical assembly for pumps. We have a good deal with them. Um, let's see. Uh, I used to do this on a daily basis. The past few days I actually have here a, we do a weekly, I don't know if you want that? It's a weekly newsletter that I do. I didn't do it this week because they didn't save the Lowell Sun for me.

T: And this is job openings? (S: Yup) All of these are job openings?

S: A hundred and fifty. I do that every week. It's done by, it's on my computer. Okay. Here are some of the companies that I list. Now the ones I know I have people hired for, I'll mention those. There's Altron, Analog and Digital Systems, Analog devices, Astro Circuit, Baird Corporation, Cambridge Tool and Manufacturing, um, these are the ones I know for sure we have people working for. Obviously there are many more that I have listed. (T: Right) Electronic Assemblies Incorporated. Um, K, C, no we don't have any there. Polymer, Wang we mentioned all ready. Protemp. They're actually a temporary organization. Normally we don't like to deal with them, partly because the city of Lowell doesn't like us to deal with temporaries. (T: Uh huh) But um, we have a very good relationship with one or two temporary organizations and um, we find that we can frequently get, after a while we can get permanent jobs for clientele that turn out to be good steady people (T: Umhm) with that temporary organization.

T: Do, is there any, what's the employers uh, you've probably seen reactions, heard reactions from potential employers. You know, when either you or a Laotian has contacted them is that a, is it a pretty favorable response?

S: Generally it's favorable and generally they are calling. We get a lot of calls. All the job openings on the far left of that board are jobs that have been called in. And on the list, you'll see on the far right to a job, if it has the word call, that's a call-in rather than something I got from the newspaper. Uh, we've been getting the past two weeks a lot more call-ins and I think that might be the fact, or result of the fact that the college population is gone back to school and

people are hurting, although I'm not sure. Anyway, we try to give priority to those call-ins because it's a personal contact and we'd like to preserve that. And the people are calling us because the work is out that the Laotian is a hard worker. (T: Umhm) And we, part of our service of course is acting as a go between when problems do arise with companies, and in my experience here I've only had one or two occasions where that's happened. Oh, that was another company I didn't think of. It was Bradford Industries right down here on Rogers Street.

[Phone rings] Excuse me. [Answers phone] Laotian Office, this is Steve, may I help you? Yes. Um, I don't. If I go to the other desk I could probably get it. Can you hold a minute? Okay. They're going to say something about it I bet. Okay Bob, I'm at the other desk. Let me see if I can find where Gal keeps his monthly reports. Yeah, uh, let's see. Here we are. He does have a monthly report. No, that's a financial report. Uh, it should be (--) Okay, here we go. I got it. Pull the file. [Loud noise] And um, okay. I have July and May, and where's August? March, February, January. Huh. Um, I don't, I've got his folder but I don't see the August report handy for ESL. Yeah, okay. Um, if Gal is out sick today, and um, he must have, he left very suddenly. Oh, okay, I've got it. Could you hold on? Sorry. Laotian office. This is Steve. May I help you? Hello?

[Tape is turned off and on again]

By DES. Um, and just my feeling of neatness and appropriateness would make me want to drop the contract for that reason. (T: Yeah) But obviously if I do I cut my throat. (T: Right) My contract with the city says that I'm to work liaison with DES. They have a staffer, Laotian, down at the OET offices on Jackson Street. His intake form, his intake process takes fifteen minutes, one piece of paper. Now the theory is when he finishes his intake he sends them down to OET to do their intake. OET's intake takes anywhere from an hour to two. And it takes like ten pages. Now the word is out in the refugee community. So when they go down to OET on Jackson Street they don't bother to go in OET, they go to upstairs to DES. And they have a statewide computer bank backing them up. And they get placed very quickly and very easily. They get placed with us too, but it takes a lot of work on their part. And they don't want to go through that. So that's another complaint I have, is that um, what I've got to do to get credit, refugee comes to me looking for a job. I have to refer them to OET, so that OET can refer them to me to find them a job. That's what I have been told to do. And that's what I do now, because I have not been able to, to fight that system.

T: So in these reports it's actually a sort of quantitative look at where your credit comes from.

S: Right. The reports, if I don't make those numbers they'll cut my money. [Phone rings] They have cut money. [Answers phone] Laotian office, this is Steve, may I help you? Oh Gal, good. Uh, are you going to be in tomorrow. Okay, because Bob called from OET about your ESO Report and we have lots of problems to deal with, okay? So I just wanted to make sure you're going to come in, because we're going to have to spend some time working on that. [Pause] Um, I sent it in, but apparently you sent in the, the older one, or the wrong one. Remember we had two names for [unclear]. And we took Gal off [unclear]. Well on the report that got, went over to Bob Bultec, Yang Yu, Yang Yu. I know. So I'm wondering what you sent over, or what you put in the envelope. Well that's only part of the problem. There's many other problems we've got to talk about tomorrow, okay? So I just wanted to make sure you're coming in because it's important and we have to work on it. Good, thank you very much. Bye now. Okay.

Um, in, in, before I became Director, um, see with the City of Lowell contract the way they

worked, it was after so many months of activity we could draw down X number of dollars. Um, if we had met X percent of the performance numbers that were agreed in the contract, and I guess in the first two quarters, I think they were quarterly draw downs, in the first two quarters I guess the numbers weren't met. Or, I'm not really clear of this, this is before I came, they had been met, but the reporting format had been inaccurate and so it appeared that they had not been met. Um, this mind you, again we're dealing with numbers. The fact is um, people come in looking for a job. We find them a job and then we say, and we give, now we give them a referral letter and say, "please go down to OET, fill out their forms so that we can get credit, we can pay for the rent. We have to go through this deal with them. Then they will go down. (T: Uh huh) Or they will go down and um, they'll forget their social security card. So the paper work will never come here. (T: Right) We've done the work. We've got them a job. We've done follow-up. (T: Yeah) And we get no credit for it. (T: Uh huh) So you know, it's because of the strict reporting and paper work format um, I'd say we're missing, this is a purely off the top of my head guesstimate any where from 20 - 30% of the work we're doing (T: umhm) is not being recorded. (T: Is unnoticed, yeah) At least. Yeah. (T: It's frustrating) It is, it's frustrating. It's you know, the actual work with refugee is exciting, it's challenging, it's worthwhile. It's when it comes the end of the month and we make these reports. And when we get a call and we're told suddenly that these 56 cases that we have been working on are non-credit worthy, that's when it gets extremely frustrating.

T: What levels of politics are involved in this, dealing with the city? I mean who's, who's agenda is what?

S: Yeah, this is much too early for me to say, partly because I've only been back in the states less than a year. Uh, I've only been coming to Lowell now since around April. And also my nature tends, I am consciously have long been unpolitical. I just can't (--) I mean I'm concerned with politics in a sense of following the major issues and taking a stand on major, especially international issues. Um, but the, the small petty politics, the inter-office politics, of, of city or agency I've had enough. That's why I burned out in Thailand. And um, I haven't consciously avoided it here, but it's maybe part of my nature and make-up now that I, I just don't get involved in it. I'm learning certain people are key people. And I'm learning that if I say things wrong to them things may happen. But um, I guess that's part [unclear] for any job. (T: Yeah, sure) And to the extent possible I try to be, be all things to all people. Um, you know, I try to do my job and deal in a decent objective way with people. And even when I get angry I try not to express that anger, and realize because most of the people that I'm dealing with from the city um, I would say to date all the people that I have dealt with, if it gets to the point where the reporting format is incorrect they don't come down nasty on me. (T: Yeah) Uh, and they've always been very understanding. So to that respect I have to say that I'm dealing with a good group of people. Unfortunately they have to pay homage to the [unclear].

T: Follow the system, yeah. Um, I know you've got other things to do. One thing that I am interested in, and the whole project is interested in preparing is uh, kind of immigration stories. Stories that, about families or individuals who come here and you know, how they get situated. And I don't know that you know any. I've heard several you know, people talk about folks they know, particularly Southeast Asians who come and they can tell these wonderful American dream stories that within so many years, very few years, you know, they've got a two car garage

and a duplex, and a couple of Firebirds out front.

S: Yeah, yeah.

T: Are there cases like that, that, I mean people you know, or things that come to mind [unclear].

S: Um, not terribly, many are not in terribly great detail. Partly again because I've, I've only been involved with this particular organization in any great depth since I began working here in, in April, May, May actually. April was the first time I came up here and talk to them. Um, but I, I have seen people come in and very quickly settle in, partly because they may have had family here before. [There is a conversation going on in background unrelated to this interview] People who are citizens. The President of our Board, he's a citizen. He owns two acres down in Chelmsford. He has this beautiful kitchen garden out back, just like it was in Laos. (T: Really?) Except for the fact that it's a different climate and perhaps a lot of different vegetables. But I mean this would be very typical in Laos, where you would have a kitchen garden. I had to go to his house one day, that's why I know this. And uh, you walk in and you know, except for some of the pictures on the wall, like the picture of a Buddha, or maybe a picture of some scene from Laos, um, you would swear you were in a middle class suburban American household. Um, I guess if you sat at the dinner table you'd also know it was a Laotian family, because they'd be eating Laotian food I would guess. (T: Right) So I was, you know, I was quite impressed. A very big TV, a very big stereo system, a big plush couch, coffee table, carpet, and all the rest of it. And I think two cars in the garage. Although I don't think they were Thunderbirds.

So I have seen some of this. I've not again, I guess, been that uh, and my work here of course keeps me pretty much in the office. So I haven't had that much opportunity to get a feel for it, although I have been aware that this is what you say is the case. But I couldn't give you very much detail other than that.

T: In his case, this brings up another thing that I'm interested in. If you were to look at his garden would you recognize all the vegetables, or would some of them (--)

S: Oh I couldn't say. I know I would have to say no, simply because I, even when I was in Thailand you know, I went to the market, picked up the vegetable and bought it. Um, I did a kitchen garden once for myself, but um (--)

T: But a lot of them are vegetables that would not be native, I mean his next door neighbors who have been here eight generations wouldn't be growing the same vegetables.

S: I, I really couldn't say on that one. That's an interesting question, but I couldn't say.

T: I'd be curious. What's this (--) We had photographed and documented some gardens, that might be a thing (--) I mean it sounds like a good [unclear-loud noise].

S: Yeah, um. You want his name and address [unclear]?

T: Yeah, sure.

S: Um, there you go. You can write it down, okay?

T: Okay, yeah.

S: It's pronounced Lee Kosaio. Ko Saio. (T: Okay) And uh, Ko Saio.

T: Okay. Um, is he (--)

S: He is the current president of our board.

T: Okay. So he must have been in Lowell at one time [unclear].

S: Um, I don't really know his, his history. He's been here quite awhile. I'm pretty sure he's an American citizen. (T: Yeah) Speaks good english and has, as I say, this very nice house in Bedford. I said Chelmsford, I'm sorry, in Bedford.

T: And a kitchen garden, that's how you (--)

S: Yeah, and it was quite large. And when I went to visit him he was working in it, (T: uh huh) which is why I know he has it. And he came walking up. And I looked with great envy as I saw him doing his, his work in the garden there. Yeah.

T: Right. What's the uh, you said most of the low line, low line Laotians are Buddhist. Do many of them attend the temple in North Chelmsford?

S: Okay. Well the North Chelmsford temple is um, is Cambodian. Um, the Buddhism of Cambodia and Laos, and Thailand as well is the same if you were a branch of Buddhism, [Tarabudha?], which is different say from like Tibetan Buddhism, or Zen Buddhism. Um, the monks dress the same and they use the same language when they do their chanting. So in that respect they're the same. But um, and there is now there in North Chelmsford a Cambodian Monk who speaks Thai, and therefore could communicate with Laotians. And on occasion he has been requested and has come to do ceremonies for the Laotian. But I don't think the Laotian attend their, or go to that temple at all if ever. They might go you know, an individual, I have been there myself.

T: Yeah, we went to one service.

S: Okay. I've actually been interpreting for a meditation teacher from Cambridge, an American who has a meditation center in Cambridge.

T: Yeah, I think, I think he was there the morning I was there.

S: Okay. So that's the only reason I've been there. As I say, on occasion(--). Now there is Laos Monk now living in, in Lowell, but I understand he came to the states on a visa from France. He had resettled in France. And prior to what is what I call the, the Buddhist Lent, it's actually the

rain, the rainy season, where Monks are suppose to stay in one space for about three or four months. Um, he somehow got permission to stay in the states, but I don't think he's, he's not here as an immigrant or a refugee, he's here as a visitor. And he may be required to leave, or they may be asking permission for him to stay indefinitely. Um, but they have an apartment for him somewhere. I don't know the address. They call it the Laotian Buddhist Temple here in Lowell. Uh, I believe they do have ceremonies on a weekly basis there. Um, they had one here a few weeks ago, quite large, you know, attended by quite a few people [unclear].

T: In International?

S: Yeah, in, we have a big room over here. Yeah. I don't know how many people were here, but they did have a lot. So they do have ceremonies and I presume people are attending. Numbers I could have. You know, what could you fit in that hall at the most, maybe two or three hundred, uh, out of three thousands.

T: Who would be, is there a good contact for the Laotian temple?

S: Um, I can give you the name of a man that I think is the president of their board. (T: Okay) I don't know that I have his, I have his sir name, but it might take some time to find. But his name is Somkhith. Somkhith, and he speaks english. He's a teacher at some school. His telephone number here in Lowell is 458-9814 and that's over on Middlesex Street, somewhere down near Saint Joseph's. (T: Okay) Again the number is here. The address is there somewhere.

T: How do you spell his name?

S: S O, S O M K H I T. Somkhith. S O M K H I T. (T: Okay) And I believe he is the president of the board of the Buddhist Association. And um, if not he would know who is. He speaks good english. And he's a teacher in um, I think some elementary school here, or the elementary level.

T: Okay. What about any traditional artist or crafts people? Have you run across any?

S: Okay, there were a group of girls who um, had got together and had done some training and dancing. And they had done a few dance shows since my arriving here. Um, I have not been in contact, I have not been in contact with them for quite awhile. Um, and quite frankly it, it's a little bit of a, I don't know if you'd call it a problem. If it's that big to call a problem, but um, part of the situation is that uh, this office had done a lot of the administrative work. They did a show at the Folk Festival.

T: The National Folk Festival.

S: Yeah, the National Folk Festival. And the board was going through a process of change at that time and I wasn't director then, but um, I'm ending up paying the bills. And um, I think that this office should (--) Now they get, the girls get a stipend for that dance, but the stipend actually comes to the organization. Now what the Board has told me is that the money goes all to the girls. And I've told the Board that I think from now on if this office is going to be

involved in that, that we should be getting a percentage of any stipends simply to cover our administrative overhead. (T: Umhm) Um, and I don't think the Board likes that. So what's happening is I think the Board is now going to do all that on their own without using the office.

The reason I give you that background is because um, although I have been trying to contact these people I have not been able to make contact, and they don't come in to see me. (T: I see) And I think they think that I'm somehow taking something away from them. And so they don't want to deal with me. (T: Umhm) Um, again, Lee would know who these people are and where to (--) I know some of their names, and I have phone numbers. But every time I call I'm told that that person is not home. And when I ask them to call back, they never call back. (T: Right) So I get a feeling that something, that we've somehow lost communication unfortunately.

T: Okay. Right. Okay. I've got the names too, (S: okay, okay) from that, but I don't, (S: Yeah) I'll call Lee.

S: Other than that, there are, there's nobody that I know of who is involved in neither the dance or other aspects of uh, the arts and crafts of Laos. Um, we do have a small, small grant from the Lowell Historical Society, um, for the preservation of traditional arts. And that is currently under review by the board, because in the transition in the past couple of month, that got, no activity took place. So what's going to happen in the future I don't know.

T: Okay. All right. Well I think I may touch base with you about photographing.

S: Great.

T: Certainly the english as a second language class.

S: Uh huh, sure.

T: Because I think those would be important to have a couple of rolls of film of that.

S: Uh huh. I think you can get maybe five or six shots out of it. [Laughs]

T: But you know, someday people will wish we had photos of that. I think we should probably do it. (S: Yeah, yeah) So uh, what's the best way to proceed on that. You need to run it by the teacher obviously.

S: Yeah. Say uh, she's uh, I'm sure she'll say yes. The um, you know the best thing to do is, you can see what's happening today, and I've got some work tomorrow. Could you call me tomorrow morning between nine and twelve? (T: Yup, yup) And that will force me to remember and Rita will be here. I can just get up, go over and say, "hey, if Tom Rankin comes in and takes some photos someday, would you care?"

T: Okay.

S: And we might even be able to set a date.

T: Yeah, we could do it maybe the following day if it's okay with her.

S: Fine. If it's fine with her it's fine with me.

T: Okay.

S: Yeah.

T: Okay. I'll call you in the morning between (--)

S: Good. That, that would be most convenient for me.

T: Nine and twelve, okay.

S: She leaves, you know, (--) Let's see, I want to make sure I have nothing on for tomorrow. Yeah, I don't. Tomorrow is Thursday, yeah. Um, classes end at twelve. She usually is out of here by 12:15 unless she's in a rush. So if you could call before twelve it's best.

T: Okay. Good. Well thanks Steve for (--)

S: Great, okay.

T: I know you got other people (--)

S: Actually I know I'm not going to get anything done until the work (--)

END OF TAPE